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# Connecting Graduate Level Non-Native English Speakers To Language Support Resources

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CONNECTING GRADUATE LEVEL NON-NATIVE ENGLISH SPEAKERS TO  
LANGUAGE SUPPORT RESOURCES

by

Kathryn Korchik

A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Master of Arts  
in English as a Second Language.

Hamline University

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **Introduction**

Through my work as a student services professional at a large research university in the Midwest, I have identified a need to better serve graduate level students. This project asks how we can build the capacity of student services staff and university faculty to connect graduate level English language learners to appropriate language-based resources. This first chapter will explain my personal motivation for completing this project, why I believe that helping graduate students connect with language resources is important, and a preview of the next chapters in this paper.

### **Author's Background**

When I first started working in higher education in 2004, I believed that people from different communities around the world bring a needed and valuable perspective to the American classroom. I was also raised with a deep respect for the power of education to transform lives. This opinion had been formed, in part, by my previous experiences. I had the privilege of studying abroad and had been exposed to many different exchange students and foreign visitors while growing up. In addition, I had personal and professional contact with immigrant and refugee communities in my city. Through these activities, I solidified my belief that diversity is something worth striving for and that welcoming people from other cultural backgrounds is one way to help people understand themselves and to grow. This position towards diversity is not always shared and the

work is rarely easy. Still, I wanted to make a positive contribution to the effort to internationalize the curriculum on my campus when I joined student services. For this project, I bring the assumptions that international students who do not speak English as their native language are a welcome addition to the American campus, that student services is beneficial to student success, and that increasing our capacity to serve all students is important.

My first role in education was as support staff at a large research university in the Midwest. I quickly transitioned to becoming an academic adviser for undergraduate students planning to major in language or math based fields. I found it to be a huge privilege and a great pleasure to help students master the university systems and get the most out of their education. People sometimes talk about the “hidden curriculum” in college. Besides the content they were learning in their classrooms, students were also learning how to engage with a large bureaucracy, how to advocate for themselves, and understand the cultural norms of the academy. These skills are both self-taught and scaffolded by student affairs offices. Through this job I learned about the myriad support services available to students, some of which I had used as student and others that I had not.

More importantly, I came to more deeply appreciate the situation of students who arrived on campus with backgrounds that left them less prepared than other students to successfully navigate the world of American higher education. Some were first generation students who did not have any family members with higher education experience to help guide them. Some were international students trying to learn a new

academic culture. Some had never competed with such a large number of accomplished students or used support services before. My job was to facilitate their learning and development by helping them to choose courses, majors, and engagement activities and to access student services while preparing for life post-graduation.

Later, I transitioned to a new student services role at the university. This move also changed the population that I served. Instead of undergraduate students who were new to higher education and had four years to complete degrees, my new students were older and seeking professional degrees and post baccalaureate certificates in graduate school. These graduate programs were competitive, specialized, expensive, and relatively short. I was still working to help students choose classes and navigate the university system, but the landscape had changed. It became clear that the university experience is different for graduate students and therefore the model of student support.

### **Challenges of Supporting Graduate Students**

Graduate students are expected to be much more self-sufficient than undergraduate students. To be admitted, students need to have completed an undergraduate degree. Many people- students, faculty and staff - seemed to believe that previous baccalaureate experience is sufficient preparation for graduate school. The thinking seemed to be that students had already learned about higher education and figured out how to complete a degree program. Many assumed that adults in graduate programs had developed beyond undergraduate support needs and they were ready to transition from being primarily learners to being primarily doers in the academy. Of course, not all undergraduate programs are the same. The experience of a small liberal arts college is not similar to a

large research university, nor is the experience of a foreign undergraduate institution particularly predictive of the experience in an American graduate research program. For many students there is a large learning curve, but this adjustment must come quickly.

The job of supporting graduate students showed me that there are institutional barriers to getting sufficient help. I realized that many of the support services I had referred my students to in my previous position were built around and funded by undergraduate student units. It wasn't clear if graduate students were eligible to use the services, or if they were, whether the services were even appropriate.

Orientation for graduate students is also different. Programs for undergraduates have become more centralized over the years and nearly all freshmen and transfer students have similar campus introductions. However, graduate programs vary so much and are so specialized that any standard program would not meet student needs. So while there is an orientation for all graduate level students at my university, it is short and consists mostly of meeting with program staff and faculty and attending a generalized resource fair.

Another consideration is the nature of graduate education. It is much more specialized than undergraduate programs and students and staff may easily be siloed in their respective areas of study and engage much less with the larger university on many campuses. This means that students and staff may have limited knowledge of the campus community. Faculty may not be aware of all the resources available to students and students may not know where to go for help.

In addition, I noticed that graduate students were much more reluctant to ask for help in the first place or they came asking for very specific targeted help. It seems that



graduate students, on the whole, were invested in showing their competence and demonstrating their ability to manage their own affairs. Yet, graduate students still need support.

My training in English as a Second Language helped me identify a particularly vulnerable population in this system. My observations were that international students who did not complete their prior training at an American school and who use English as a second (or third, or fourth) language, may need to lean on university services more heavily than other students in order to be successful.

### **International Student Support Problems**

Learning a second language after early childhood is hard. It can take many years for a person to become comfortable speaking and interacting in their target language at even just a conversational level. The stakes are even higher when a person decides to use their second language in an academic setting. A student's language skills must allow them to read, write, and speak at a level that competes with highly educated native speakers. Current social, political, and economic conditions still encourage students from non-English speaking countries to attend American colleges and universities. For the student who comes to study in the United States, especially at the post-baccalaureate level, facility with English is key to their overall success (Andrade, 2009).

International students often come to colleges and universities at a significant disadvantage, especially for master's level programs since these are typically only 2-3 year programs. Two years is not a lot of time to become fluent in American academic culture and prepare for a career or a higher level degree. If international students

experience language and communication difficulties this can impede their ability to grasp content area knowledge and compete for desirable jobs or other academic opportunities.

People judge others intelligence subtly and not-so-subtly based on their use of language (Lippi-Green, 2004). In a graduate level program a person's writing and professional speaking can directly affect their professional and career outcomes. Employers rate good communication skills as one of the most important factors in success. It's absolutely crucial that students are able to read, write and speak at a very high level of linguistic and cultural fluency.

As the literature review in the following chapter will show, this analysis of why students need to have good language skills is well accepted. Few argue that students don't need to have good English skills in American graduate programs. However university faculty and staff, as well as students, often underestimate how much help will be required once students arrive on campus (Halic, et al 2009). Earning high scores on standardized tests such as the TOEFL or IELTS does not always translate into success. Some students who were at the top of their class or won awards in English in their home countries find that they are unprepared to navigate the American university in the way that they expected. This is because exams and language curriculums are not testing for all of the aspects of language and communication that a student needs in an academic environment. It may come as a genuine surprise that students admitted to these programs will need language help.

Universities that admit non-native English speakers have an obligation to serve the language needs of these students and offer appropriate support. Fortunately, most

institutions offer some kind of help. This usually comes in the form of classes (either for credit or enrichment), writing centers, multicultural student support centers, conversation groups, and tutors. These types of services have a demonstrated positive impact on student communication skills.

However, a perennial problem is how to best connect students to these resources, especially on a large and distributed campus such as a public research university. The services may exist, but they may be underutilized. Barriers to accessing support services include all of the barriers present for all graduate students - not knowing about the services, not understanding how to use the services most effectively, being embarrassed about needing the services, or not seeing their value – with the additional issues of communication and cultural concerns that are unique to international students.

The goal of this project is to help bring available resources and the students who need them together. Specifically, the project seeks to build the capacity of student services staff and university faculty to connect graduate level English language learners to appropriate language-based resources.

### **Summary**

In this chapter I outlined my experience as a student services professional and my underlying assumptions that international students are a welcome addition to the campus, that student services is helpful to students, and that we should work to increase our capacity to serve. I also highlighted my perception that graduate student needs are not currently being met at the same level that undergraduate needs are. Although there are support services available to students on a college campus, many are tailored to the

undergraduate student population. It can be difficult for students to navigate this situation and know what is available to them. Therefore, there is a need to create tools and resources for specific graduate student populations to make their search for support more efficient. One area where international students in graduate programs could benefit is related to language support. Because English proficiency impacts an international student's experience in all areas, it is particularly important. This project seeks to build the capacity of student services staff and university faculty to connect graduate level English language learners to appropriate language-based resources.

Chapter 2 of this paper reviews the literature about international students and English proficiency, the graduate experience, help-seeking, and the role of student services. Next, Chapter 3 outlines the project's timeline and methods of creation. Finally, Chapter 4 will discuss the evaluation of the project and offer an outline of suggested future steps.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **Literature Review**

#### **Chapter Overview**

This project seeks to discover how to build the capacity of student services staff and university faculty to connect graduate level English language learners to appropriate language-based resources. The previous chapter of this paper discussed the motivations for engaging in this project. This chapter is a review of the literature which offers a synthesis of what other researchers already understand about international graduate students, why English proficiency is salient to their success, what level of proficiency students typically have, what their help-seeking behavior is, why student services can be the place to help facilitate connections, and how this information contributes to the design of the current project. This inquiry will help shape the construction of the project and ground it in context, helping to justify the effort and anticipate the needs of the students, staff, and faculty who may benefit from its creation.

In this review, the number of international students coming to the United States to undertake graduate degree programs is explored. In addition, attention will be given to the reasons that international students choose to study outside their home countries, why they are important to American university campuses, and why it should be a priority to help facilitate the improvement of English proficiency. Next, determining what the typical English proficiency is for non-native speakers of English when they begin study at a university helps us understand what support might be most appropriate.

Another aspect to be considered is the structure and delivery methods of student support for graduate students, especially in the context of a large research university. In addition, if our ultimate goal is to help students succeed, we must identify how students prefer to seek help and from whom and lastly why student services is a good place to build tools to support student needs. Using the information from this exploration, chapter 3 will outline the project and its methods.

### **Non-Native English-speaking Graduate Students in the United States**

#### **Enrollment Numbers and Demographics**

The term “international student” in the United States is applied a learner based on their legal status. Although there are many students in U.S. institutions of higher education who were born, raised, or educated in another country, international students are narrowly defined as people who hold a temporary visa for the primary purpose of studying and training in the United States. As a whole, students who came to study in American universities on temporary student visas in the 2015-2016 academic year made up about 5% of the total student population in higher education (Open Doors, 2016). That doesn’t sound like much at first glance. The situation changes, however, when considering graduate students. In the fall of 2015, international students made up a whopping 22% of all first time graduate students in the United States (Okahana, H., Feaster, K., & Allum, J. 2016). That means in 2015 about one in five new graduate students was from a country outside the United States.

A recent study by the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) indicates that these enrollments might be declining by about 2%, based on a survey sent to CGS deans in the

spring inquiring about students matriculating in the fall of 2017 (Okahana 2017). It is important to understand that the overall numbers mask the issue of distribution (Andrade, 2009). Some schools host more international students than others and are affected by shifts in different ways. This decline appears to more strongly affect schools that are less research heavy. Institutions classified as “R1”, or research focused universities such as the one featured in this project, saw their enrollments stay steady (Okahana, 2017). Only about 100-150 of the approximately 3,200 post-secondary institutions in the United States could be considered research universities (Altbach, 2004 and Andrade, 2009). This underscores the concentration of international students in select schools. Even with the slight dip, international students will still make up a substantial portion of the student body at graduate schools across the nation in the 2017-2018 academic year.

Many of international students are non-native speakers of English and a sizeable number of them will come from Asian countries. In fact, in 2016, 36% of all new international graduate students in master’s programs in the United States came from China alone (Okahana 2017). Because of this large representation, much of the literature about the international student experience in the U.S. focuses on students from Asia (Young, 2013, Andrade, 2009) and assumes that English proficiency is a central consideration.

Another group of students enrolled in graduate school in the U. S. that may also include non-native speakers of English are permanent residents, naturalized citizens, and refugees. These students are much more difficult to track than international students, as they may have attended American secondary and post-secondary educational institutions.

They are not required to identify themselves nor are they asked to provide proof of English language proficiency when they apply to programs if they have had American schooling. Although distinct, with their own unique circumstances, this group may share select characteristics of international students including language and cultural considerations. The remainder of this paper will focus on international students as they represent a larger population of non-native English speakers in U.S. higher education. However, any project that concerns language support resources should be mindful of the entire population of non-native speakers of English in higher education, as they may also benefit from its creation.

Overall, the numbers of international students in graduate school represent a significant population who may need language and cultural assistance. With that in mind, institutions will need to offer ways to support them in their academic success.

### **Motivations for studying in the United States**

The forces of globalization have had a significant impact on the landscape of higher education, Altbach notes (2004). More than 1.5 million people will study abroad at any point in the year, which is a greater proportion of the world's population than at any other time in history since the medieval period (Altbach, 2004). Choosing to pursue education outside of a student's home country is not a neutral proposition and comes with monetary, social, and psychological costs.

There are many reasons that a student might choose to study outside of their home country. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) describe a Push/Pull dynamic where students are "pushed" out of their local systems of higher education for economic, financial, social, or



other reasons. Prospective students make the calculation that there is a higher pay-off in one or more of these areas if they attend a foreign institution. Once the student has decided to study internationally, there are reasons why a student is “pulled” to a particular host country. Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) describe six different factors that pull a student to a particular host country or institution: knowledge and awareness of a host country, personal recommendations, costs, the environment of the institution, geographic proximity to their home country, and social links with others who are currently attending or have attended the institution in the past. Many times, the result of this calculation leads students to American universities, as the above numbers show.

The landscape of higher education worldwide is not equal. Altbach points out that current forces disadvantage developing countries and smaller academic systems because they lack the resources to support research and knowledge generation, such as libraries, laboratories, and highly qualified faculty and staff (2004). For numerous reasons, top tier institutions are clustered in northern developed countries. They typically share a number of characteristics: they have both traditions and state support of academic freedom, have the resources to support the needed infrastructure, enjoy access to qualified faculty, and produce work in a dominant language (Altbach, 2004). The system of inequality is self-perpetuating, as they draw top talent and resources away from other institutions. As Mazzarol and Soutar’s (2002) list shows, once an institution is well regarded it continues to draw students. Students come to American universities in search of prestige, better resources, and increased economic and professional opportunities.

### **Role of English in Attracting Students**

Important to note is the role of English in drawing students to American universities. Many students will enroll in American graduate programs *because of*, not *in spite of*, the fact they are conducted in English. As Altbach points out, in contemporary higher education it is important for academics to publish and, “English is the medium of most internationally circulated scientific journals; it also dominates many other academic fields.” (2004). English is the dominant language in scholarly websites and other technological and scientific communication. It is also one of the most widely spoken second languages in the world. American universities are attractive because they are part of the largest academic system in the world and because they operate in English, which gives students access to knowledge across the world, not just from the American academy (Altbach, 2004). Because some 20% of Chinese and Indians students educated in American universities will not stay in the country long-term (Altbach, 2009), the acquisition of English is not solely a skill students are trying to gain for purposes of integrating into an American lifestyle. They are learning the language as an access point to the larger pursuit of knowledge worldwide and as gateway to better economic or professional opportunities. Students recognize the advantages of choosing a program in the U.S for improving their academic English.

This point is important because it emphasizes the need to help meet the expectations of the students coming to study and provide adequate support in their goals. Providing support to these students in their English skills is something that students welcome. Graduate programs that succeed in meeting the factors that Mazzarol (2002) lists will be better positioned to continue welcoming international graduate students.

### **Institutional Motivations for Attracting and Retaining International Students**

While students have their own reasons for choosing to study in the U.S., institutions also recognize the benefits of international student enrollment. These benefits are both practical and philosophical. Andrade (2009) describes how international students can be understood as a “critical resource”. She argues that our national interests are served when we produce graduates who are able to work effectively in a global and interconnected world and international students offer an opportunity for domestic students to interact with people who come from different countries and cultures. Andrade also suggests that meaningful interactions that are structured and supported by the institution both in and out of class foster real life skills in collaboration with others, conflict resolution, and building empathy that can transfer to the workplace for domestic and international students alike (Andrade & Evans, 2009).

She also discusses the practical benefits. As political and economic forces change, higher education continues to search for ways to financially support itself and relies more and more on tuition to fund operations as government support has dropped. International students typically pay a higher tuition rate so they are a welcome stream of revenue (so long as their support needs don’t outstrip the financial gain) (Fass & Vaughn, 2015). Andrade points out that many graduate programs are suffering from a shortage in students and international students can fill those spots (2009). Stuart Anderson (2013) agrees and provides data to show that some critical graduate programs could not exist without the international student population that supports the research conducted in these departments. He points out that, “A policy of welcoming international students helps the

United States maintain its leadership as a center of learning and innovation” (Anderson, 2013).

If students have a successful experience at a university they are more likely to both recommend the university to others and be a social link to the campus. One way to help students have a successful experience, and to therefore support institutional goals, is to provide adequate student support services. English language support for non-native speakers is especially important as it undergirds all other areas of student learning, engagement, and satisfaction at the university.

### **Importance of English Proficiency**

An interest in and attention to language issues is central to the literature regarding international students. Ramia, Marginson, and Sawir point out in *Regulating International Students' Wellbeing*, “Communication is key to active agency and cross-cultural relations and to learning, and language related difficulties are the most frequently reported item in research on international students in English-speaking countries.” (2013, p.10). A discussion of English language proficiency issues is present in almost every study or article about international students; It is present in discussions about admissions and student success (Abel. 2002; Cho, 2012; Fass & Vaghn, 2015), acculturation and engagement (Andrade & Evans, 2009; Shupe 2007; Tung, 2011; Zhang, 2010), self-image (Halic et al., 2009), and well-being (Ramia, et al., 2013). The attention to international students’ communication skills is obvious with just a casual search. Both students and their universities want students to achieve and maintain high levels of English proficiency as a means to reaching the other goals of higher education.

## **Understanding Proficiency**

But what does proficiency mean? When referring to language, professionals talk about the different levels of skill as “proficiency”. Proficiency is measured against a set of standards that is meant to be as objective and consistent as possible. For example, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Proficiency Guidelines are a description of “what individuals can do with language in terms of speaking, writing, listening, and reading in real-world situations in a spontaneous and non-rehearsed context” (2012). ACTFL rates language learners on a scale of ability. Proficiency may also refer to a much more subjective assessment of language skill in a casual context. In either case, discussion of “high proficiency” is meant to represent a high level of language facility where the speaker can effectively communicate in context at a relatively high level of sophistication. Proficiency is distinct from “fluency” which refers to the flow of comprehensible language.

Despite the general agreement that language proficiency is important, there remains some argument about what level of language proficiency is required to be successful in a university degree program. There is also disagreement about how proficiency and success are defined and measured. Smith notes that, “Researchers argue that language proficiency is difficult to measure because communication depends on grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discoursed competence, and the verbal and nonverbal dimensions of a language.” (Smith, 2016). Not all of this is captured in a standardized test. However, standardized testing is the currently the most efficient way of getting a basic sense of a prospective student’s English capabilities.

### **Measuring Proficiency with Standardized Tests**

Typically, non-native speakers are asked to provide scores from standardized exams of English to demonstrate their English proficiency when applying to academic degrees and programs. The most commonly accepted exam for admission to American colleges and universities is the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). The majority of institutions have a minimum cutoff score to ensure that admitted students have proficiency levels high enough to be successful in an academic environment. According to a list on a website maintained by a company called American Exam Services, most U.S. universities and colleges set their minimum scores on the internet based TOEFL exam between 79-100 out of a possible 120. The minimum scores on the list represent university or college-wide standards for both undergraduate and graduate students. Some programs within universities require higher scores, but overall this is the general expectation. The scoring information from Educational Testing Service (ETS), the company that owns and administers the test, shows that a person could earn scores in the intermediate or fair range in all four component areas to receive a 79, or a combination of high and low ratings (Educational Testing Service, 2017). That means that there will be students arriving at a university with overall intermediate proficiency showing varying strengths in each area of reading, speaking, writing, and listening. Therefore, successful language support programs will target students in the low-intermediate or higher level.

Indeed, beliefs about language implicitly and explicitly shape our perceptions of other people. Like other ideas and processes that are central to human behavior, people make assumptions about how it works that are simply not true. This includes the highly

educated. These beliefs and judgments, interestingly enough, can extend to the language learners themselves – as Lippi-Green notes, “people use false assumptions about language to justify judgments that have more to do with race, national origin, regional affiliation, ethnicity, and religion than with human language and communication” (2004).

### **Academic Success and Proficiency**

Universities expect international students to struggle. They arrive on campus, typically just days before the semester begins, and must quickly adapt to their new surroundings. For convenience sake, many researchers categorize the various types of adjustments that students must make into the broad categories of academic, social, and personal (Andrade & Evans, 2009). However, it is important to understand how these concepts are interrelated and overlap. English proficiency is often considered an academic adjustment concern, but problems with proficiency can also impact friendships (social) and self-esteem (personal) (Shupe, 2007).

How a student feels about their ability to communicate in English with faculty and peers in a sophisticated manner affects their view of themselves and their abilities. In a study by Halic, Greenberg, and Paulus (2009), the authors explored the self-perceptions of international students on how their language proficiency helped to shape their academic identity. Several of the students interviewed discussed how their language proficiency and the switching between their native language and English had an impact on both their confidence and self-esteem. In addition, the students felt frustrated when they were unable to express themselves the way they wanted due to limited English vocabulary and one student expressed concern that he would be perceived as

“unintelligent” (Halic, et al, 2009) for any errors. These students felt a real sense of frustration about being perceived as experts at home to suddenly being novices in their academic fields in a new environment. This is just one example of how proficiency relates to student adjustment. As Shupe notes, “adjustment is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon” (2007).

The stress of fitting in to the dominant culture is called acculturative stress (Tung, 2011). Tung reviewed literature that shows that, “the sources of acculturative stress often include English language difficulties, academic struggles, cultural adaptation, problematic perfectionism, lack of social supports, homesickness, and perceived discrimination.” (2011). All of these factors have a hand in whether or not a student is successful on campus, though language proficiency is the third most important predictor of psychosocial adjustment for international students, behind stress and social support (Zhang, 2010) showing its importance in student success.

#### **Academic Success vs. Academic Achievement**

Determining if something is successful is dependent on how success is defined. York, Gibson, and Rankin noted that the terms “academic success” and ‘academic achievement” are used interchangeably in much of the research on higher education (2015). This is problematic. The term academic success encompasses a broad set of goals (achievement, satisfaction, acquisition of skills and competencies, persistence, attainment of learning objectives, and career success), but academic achievement is narrowly tied to grades and GPA (York, et. al., 2015). For example a good grade in a class demonstrates that a student was able to meet the standards of that class, but does not necessarily reflect



actual learning. Unfortunately, for much of the literature, the measurements routinely used to define success in higher education mostly mean GPA (York, et al. 2015). This lack of precision makes it difficult to compare various studies. It also flattens the understanding of what influences student success in the broader sense.

### **TOEFL as a Predictor of Academic Success**

TOEFL scores measure various aspects of language skills but they are only loosely correlated with academic success, as defined by GPA (Cho, 2012). Cho does indicate, however, that the trend is that higher TOEFL scores are at least somewhat indicative of students success (meaning higher GPAs) and are a better indicator than other standardized tests (such as the SAT, GRE, GMAT, etc) (2012) of future academic performance. This supports the idea that language skills influence student achievement and is an argument for continued use of TOEFL scores in admission decisions, despite not having a stronger correlation.

Standardized tests have their limitations. A student's standardized test score may suggest they are more likely to succeed than another student with a lower score, but there are a number of factors that influence actual performance once they are on campus. A score also may not accurately predict how much language support a student will require. In the Halic (2009) study, for example, students with admissible TOEFL scores commented about how different the actual use of English was in the United States from the way they learned and used English in their home countries. Students are often surprised by this difference (Young, 2013) and may not have guessed how much language support they would need.

There is some evidence that initial language weakness doesn't preclude academic achievement. Recognizing that language proficiency is important, some institutions have been tempted to raise the minimum level of TOEFL scores required for incoming international students (Fass & Vaughn, 2015). However, raising the required TOEFL score may lead to fewer qualified international applicants. For many schools, having fewer international students enrolled is undesirable for the economic and philosophical reasons discussed earlier in this review. In a 2015 study of undergraduate students at one western American university, Fass and Vaughn concluded that students can succeed academically (as understood by acceptable GPAs) in spite of English language difficulties. They suggest that universities instead offer language support to incoming students. This implies that connecting students to these services can mitigate the negative effects of initial lower proficiency levels.

### **Responsibility for Improving English Skills**

One area to consider is where the onus of responsibility lies for learning the skills that are necessary to function on a large campus. Much of the literature in the 20<sup>th</sup> century about international students takes the position that students are responsible for their adjustment and overall success. Following on this idea, institutions tend to view the responsibility for working on language issues as belonging to the student; "What can be demonstrated again and again is this: members of the dominant language groups feel perfectly empowered to reject their portion of the burden and to demand that a person with an accent (that is, an accent that differs from their own accent) carry a disproportionate amount of the responsibility in the communicative act." (Lippi-Green,

2004). Generally what this means is that we often place the burden for clarifying communication difficulties at the feet of NNS of English. This experience can be stressful for students unfamiliar with the resources around them.

A great number of studies are devoted to understanding the difficulties that international students face. This is not without merit, as significant stressors are present for these students. On the other hand, as Tseng and Newton note, very few studies have been done to learn how students experience their study abroad lives in positive ways (2002). It turns out that international students are retained and graduate at rates that are equal to or better than domestic students (Andrade, 2009; Fass-Holmes, 2016). If student “success” is measured in part on graduation rates, it’s clear that international students are achieving some of that success. Despite the difficulties that international students are experiencing, they seem to be finding ways to positively cope. There is not much literature to understand international student persistence and retention, but Andrade (2009) believes that their success can be partly attributed to the programs that universities have created to assist these students.

Perucci and Hu challenged that in a 1995 study about international student levels of satisfaction with their academic experience. They suggested that instead of understanding adjustment to the dominant culture of the host institution as the main goal, that the emphasis should be placed on student satisfaction. They argue focus on adjustment ignores the responsibility of the host culture to change to meet the needs of the students. "We view students as playing an active role in coping with their new environment and not

simply adjusting to the new situation, but learning how to use resources to achieve their objectives.” (Perucci & Hu 1995)

Modern theories of student development continue to support that concept. Baxter Magolda (2001) has written extensively about a theory of self-authorship. This orientation to student services emphasizes the student’s own agency in education, suggesting that students are not passive, but instead they are active and legitimate creators of knowledge themselves. With that perspective, helping students make sense of their educational experience is a shared responsibility, borne by both the student and the institution.

### **Help Seeking Behaviors**

One way to understand international students relative success is to understand how they have been understood to seek and receive help. The importance of understanding student help seeking behaviors has risen over time as we learn more about various learning strategies. Help seeking can be considered a crucial educational skill (Karabenick & Newman, 2006). Psychologists have tried to determine why students seek help, why they don’t, and who they ask for assistance. What has been demonstrated is that help seeking is context specific, and therefore somewhat complex (Karabenick & Newman, 2006). Educators have been known to remark that the students most in need of help are the least likely to seek it, and this observation holds true in the literature (Karabenick & Knapp, 1988). However, certain strategies can be employed to encourage students to effectively seek help (Karabenick & Newman, 2006).

Help seeking in academic settings is often characterized as adaptive or nonadaptive (Williams & Takaku, 2011). Williams notes that, “adaptive help seeking occurs when students experience academic difficulties and actively seek assistance” as opposed to nonadaptive behaviors where a student seeks help unnecessarily or avoids dealing with the problem (2011). Encouraging students to use adaptive strategies is important.

The first step for students in help-seeking is basic awareness of potential sources of help. Fortunately, most large research institutions have various helpers; counseling centers, faculty, advisors, student services staff, or friends are possible helpers. Even so, students may not know who these helpers are. Lack of awareness has been cited as a deterrent to seeking support (Collins & Sims, 2006). This suggests that simple awareness projects are valuable to students. The project proposed in this paper may be useful just by showcasing the support services on offer.

Researchers have noted that people of various cultural backgrounds seek help in different ways. Shwalb and Sukemune (as cited in Williams & Takaku, 2011) noted in their research that the Japanese students they studied were more likely to seek support from peers than teachers outside the classroom. Williams (2011) notes that other research has shown similar trends with East Asian help seeking preferences.

Interestingly, the literature indicates that international students and other marginalized populations seek help from campus support more frequently than domestic white students. As Salem notes in her study about who uses the writing center, she found that, “non-native speakers of English, women, and non-white students are all more likely to use the writing center than native-speakers of English, men, and white students”

(2016). Salem's interpretation of this is that these are the populations that would historically be considered the students who need remedial help. Through a complex interplay of various factors these students see visiting campus supports as desirable.

Part of this behavior may be explained by the differences in student orientations to learning. Williams and Takaku summarize the help seeking literature indicating that students who are goal or performance oriented see asking for help as a weakness, but mastery oriented students see help seeking as step in self-efficacy (2011). Students from Asian cultural backgrounds are more likely to be mastery oriented. In other words, they understand academic success not in terms of innate talent but rather as a function of working hard. Collins and Sims (2006) suggest that students focused on mastery believe that they can change their circumstances by employing new strategies.

However, some mastery oriented students are sometimes prevented from using adaptive help seeking behaviors as a concern for ego (Williams & Takaku, 2011). Although this feeling is commonly attributed to domestic male students, the findings by Halic et al. (2009), indicates that international graduate students are concerned about how they are perceived and what their language ability says about their intelligence. Therefore, although international students may visit writing centers more often than some other students, it can't be automatically assumed that international students will view visiting campus supports such as a writing center as desirable.

Any resource that purports to connect students to language help will need to take the issue of identity and ego into consideration in its design. One strategy to minimize the concern for ego and self-esteem is to normalize help seeking for all students (Collins &

Sims, 2006). In addition, if offering help to international students is to be effective, helpers need to be prepared to assist the students with appropriate resources in accordance with the students' specific needs and goals (Collins & Sims, 2006).

### **Language Support Services**

Once students and/or staff has recognized that a student needs additional language support, several strategies could be used. Within universities there are several different types of language support that students might encounter. These can include tutors, writing centers, formal ESL classes, multicultural centers, or peer mentors as well as faculty or professional advising. Each of these types of supports have various levels of effectiveness and are considered to exist on a continuum from self-access materials to fully embedded support within a discipline (Briguglio & Watson, 2014). At large schools, these resources are often dispersed. In addition they may not be intended for graduate students, as the assumption is that graduate students will not access support in the same way. It might also be assumed that graduate students have higher level of language proficiency than undergraduate students.

Strong writing especially, is a skill that is necessary for graduate students (Swales, 2004) so interventions and strategies tied to writing are especially relevant. Writing directly impacts whether graduate students complete their thesis (Hamizad, 2014). Writing centers, then are clear places to help students improve their language skills.

### **Student Affairs in a Large Research University**

Student affairs is the area in a college or university that is geared towards supporting the holistic success of students. Student support has been part of campuses since the

beginning of higher education, but the field really began to find its footing in the twentieth century as staff began to take on more of the roles that were traditionally handled by faculty and as higher education began to explicitly speak about theories of student development (Hevel, 2016). This was a response to the growing numbers of students that universities were beginning to serve and the shifting nature of college education. Over time, the field has changed as social, political, and economic forces have shaped the understanding of the purpose for higher education (ASPA & NASPA, 2010). As we have moved into a different kind of economy that is less industrial and more digital, there has been more pressure on higher education to train people to be effective knowledge workers.

Student affairs staff are currently concerned with shifting the definition of student affairs work away from “student development and toward student learning” (ASPA & NASPA, 2010), though many in the field understand that development and learning are intertwined. As such, the distinction between academic affairs and student affairs can often be blurred in modern colleges and universities.

Student affairs is a large field, but how it manifests on a particular campus is important. In *One Size Does Not Fit All*, Kathleen Manning, Jillian Kinze, and John H. Schuh argue that the structural organization of student affairs makes a profound impact on its ability to serve students (2014). These structures have a direct connection to the purpose of student services. Different models of organization produce different results and can range from a traditional models (such as extra or co-curricular, functional silos,



and learning centered) which are all based in administrative needs, or more innovative student driven models which center the student more explicitly (Manning, et al, 2014).

Types of student affairs organizations can also range from centralized to decentralized. In smaller colleges and universities student affairs work is typically centralized as student populations are smaller and the work of the institution is narrow in scope compared to larger universities. Large research universities tend to have decentralized student affairs organizations (Manning, et al 2014). Although larger research campuses may have more resources overall, they also serve more a wider range of goals and an incredibly diverse set of people. Research universities, both public and private, offer degree programs in a very wide number of fields while simultaneously engaging in basic and applied research. In addition to this, these universities are often homes to additional institutes, programs, and healthcare organizations that are not always directly tied to student education. This means in practice that there are often distributed and overlapping services and support programs aimed at different populations.

### **Undergraduate vs Graduate Student Support**

In 2007, an article published by EMBO Reports asked a number of academic leaders and other prominent stakeholders about their thoughts on the future of the classic research university. In it, several leaders commented on the classic tension between teaching and research, pointing out that teaching resources are geared more towards undergraduate education and research related activities are central to the graduate programs. Support resources for students are often skewed towards undergraduate students (Guentzel & Nesheim, 2006). In addition, the willingness and ability of any

support program designed for undergraduates to serve graduate students is not always obvious.

Guentzel and Nesheim (2006) argue that the graduate student experience is different enough from the undergraduate experience that emphasis on student support built specifically for the graduate student is necessary. One misperception about graduate education is that students are sufficiently taken care of by their departments and that faculty play a lead role in supporting them. However, that is not always the case and the idea is based on older models of graduate programs with smaller student to faculty ratios (Guentzel & Nesheim 2006). Supporting non-traditional students is an area where this problem is highlighted, as an individual faculty member or department may not have experience or expertise outside of their programs. International student language needs demonstrate this issue.

Very few faculty members who are not specialists in language or related subjects actually understand what, in practice, intermediate proficiency means. This can cause a number of problems for students once they are on campus. When Trice studied academic departments' responses to international graduate students, she noted that most faculty understood at least some aspect of value in welcoming them to campus (2009). She notes that despite this understanding, "many expected international students to speak English fluently and to understand content at the same rate and through the same instructional approaches that American students found effective. Most did not make significant changes to what or how they taught. They also did not communicate with these students to learn how they could better address their needs and utilize their strengths." (2005).

This mismatch in expectations indicates a place where student services staff can especially help. They are much more likely to have staff who have been trained to recognize and connect students to campus support (Guentzel & Nesheim, 2006).

Themes from Guentzel and Nesheim's book *Supporting Graduate and Professional Students* are that graduate student support is typically fragmented and isolating, that student services staff can play a significant role in helping to address this problem, and any solution must be tailored to a particular institution since both graduate students and programs are much more heterogeneous than undergraduate students and programs.

The project described in this paper is embedded in the context of a large R1 university in the American Midwest. This particular organizational structure necessitates the need for referral which explains the emphasis on connecting students. Student affairs staff has the expertise to lead in this area and may even be able to change the models of support from simple referral to empowering students to take charge of their own learning (Manning, et al, 2006).

### **Summary**

This review of the literature has shown that international students are an important part of the campus community at the graduate level in American universities. They make up a significant population of students, justifying the attention to their special needs. A large proportion of these are non-native speakers of English, and research overwhelmingly supports the idea that proficiency matters in their academics and in the overall well-being and success of students. Admission standards dictate that they come to campus with at least intermediate level English proficiency, however, higher levels of

language proficiency play a role in how well students adapt to their institution, how students shape their academic identities, and influences their success in a program. Connecting them to campus language support resources is one way to help students acculturate and thrive on campus.

Unfortunately, large research universities often have dispersed student support programs creating barriers for students actively seeking help. Specifically, student support is less well coordinated in graduate education than undergraduate education. A focus on helping students navigate this landscape and encouraging positive help seeking behaviors is desirable. Student services staff can play a central role in being the bridge between students in need and the wider campus community. This project seeks to address these issues by building the capacity of student services staff and university faculty to connect graduate level English language learners to appropriate language-based resources.

We have looked at the author's motivations for this project and reviewed relevant literature. In Chapter 3, I will describe the project itself. It outlines how various support resources will be compiled and the methods of presenting them to students and staff.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **Methods**

#### **Introduction**

The previous chapters in this paper described the problem to be solved and the current research that supports and informs the project. This project seeks to build the capacity of student services staff and university faculty to connect graduate level English language learners to appropriate language-based resources. This chapter outlines the methods of developing a student support tool that can be used by graduate students and the faculty and staff that support them. To build the support tool, I used contemporary models of student development theory to shape the structure of this project and the ADDIE model of instructional design.

Constructivist developmentalism assumes that students construct their ideas of themselves in community with others, that this understanding is dependent on increasing complexity, and that students are capable of understanding and articulating a reliable view of themselves and others and of making meaning of the world (Jones & Stewart 2016).

This theory of student development relates to this project because it assumes that students will be able to consider their current need for support through their own observations or the observations of others. It also assumes that with the addition of more resources and information that the student is capable of developing further and that they

can construct a more complex view of themselves in the context of their education. The tool that was built will be based on the idea that students, staff and faculty will refer other students to it and their utilization of the support tool will be part of self-reflection.

### **Creation of the tool**

I used the ADDIE model of instructional design to develop this support tool. The ADDIE model is a somewhat generic process traditionally used by instructional designers and training developers when building online courses or support tools (Instructional Design.org). This model has a linear progression and follows the following steps: Analysis > Design > Development > Implementation > Evaluation. Although the ADDIE model has some limitations, including the fact that it is not iterative and assumes a linear progression, it is a useful model for building online educational support sites. I did not follow the model perfectly, however, it was a helpful organizing plan for the project. With this method, creators are able to systematically review the elements of the project and include and consider all the relevant areas to make it successful.

### **Analysis Phase**

In this phase, the project manager considers the overall situation and answers some specific questions including:

- Who is the audience and their characteristics?
- Identify the new behavioral outcome?
- What types of learning constraints exist?
- What are the delivery options?
- What is the timeline for project completion?

I started the analysis phase in September 2017 by addressing these questions. For the first question, I identified the intended audience. The project is targeted to graduate level students who are non-native speakers of English at a large Midwestern research university and the staff and faculty that support them. These students are likely to be international students, but they may also include students who are citizens or legal permanent residents of the U.S. whose first language is not English. These students may not be familiar with the systems of a large American research university. I surmised that staff, as well, may not be familiar with how to best help or intervene when a student presents with language difficulties. The ultimate goal is for the students to access the available resources throughout campus efficiently and effectively. Being able to do this with little frustration encourages students to seek needed help and increases their satisfaction with the institution.

Some learning constraints that I identified included the ability of students and staff to access the tool. Some students may not be ready to tackle their need for support. Since the tool is new, awareness of its existence was a concern. In addition, the language that is used in the tool will have to match the level of the anticipated user. Most students who are non-native speakers of English at large universities are admitted with at minimum intermediate level English proficiency as defined by TOEFL scores. Some students will arrive with higher levels of proficiency but the tool should be designed with the language level of the lowest expected level in mind.

In this first step of the project, possible delivery options for this project included a website, a course in an online course management system such as Moodle or Canvas, or

printed materials. These delivery options were chosen for consideration because they are similar to other systems that students already use. The assumption was that the adoption and use of the tool would be more successful if the users are not required to learn a new technology, can access the materials from any location and at any time of day, and are able minimize any other potential barriers to access (such as not wanting to publicly label oneself as needing support). The analysis phase included research into other possible delivery methods such as presentations, workshops, and information sessions. Ultimately for the above reasons, the option of building a website was chosen.

The timeline for completing the project was from the analysis phase in early September to December 2017, the end of the fall semester of the 2017-2018 school year.

### **Design Phase**

The next portion of the project was the design phase. This was when the learning objectives, the type of content, organization of materials, and the instruments that will be used to meet those objectives were chosen. According to dol.gov, the design phase should be systematic and specific. This means that the objectives and the ideas for content should be considered in a logical and organized fashion. This part of the project took the longest to complete as it was a process of curating content that seems deceptively simple. However, deciding what to include and what not to include was difficult as there were many considerations.

When designing content for this site I systematically considered all the potential sources of on campus support. First, I reviewed current websites at the university and made lists of all potential resources. The support services I cataloged included the



English language support center on campus, the student writing center, tutoring options, peer mentors, language exchange programs, and multicultural centers. In addition to these services, I identified information about how to access the help of librarians, counselors or advisers.

In order to capture all the resources, I worked a little bit like an investigative reporter and started with the most obvious center on campus, the English language support center. I met with the staff and faculty liaison to understand the scope and limits of their programs and how they specifically support graduate students. This meeting generated a list of common supports and referrals to conduct the next set of inquiries. During this meeting I was also alerted to the fact that there was a group of mostly faculty (but also staff) working on a parallel project about campus support resources. They were planning to hold a series of workshops throughout the semester that ended up being invaluable to this project. I signed up to attend the entire series. Through this monthly workshop I was exposed to people across campus that knew about resources that I didn't and were actively thinking about the best ways of facilitating the utilization of these programs. The relative value of various programs and resources was established during these sessions.

During the design phase I was also able to meet with stakeholders such as students, student services staff, and others about their needs and to discuss how to implement the technology.

At this time I learned that the communications team in my school was undergoing staffing changes and that the main website was going to be redesigned over the fall term with an anticipated launch date of late December or early January. This changed my

initial plans. I had hoped that the materials would be incorporated into our main website to minimize the the limitation of access because of the relatively low awareness of a completely new site. I also wanted to try to “normalize” the resources by including them, just like all other current student materials, on our main site. However, this would not be possible.

Because of this technological and timing issue, I researched other tools and learned that as staff I had access to Google Sites, which is part of the suite of Google apps and products that my university supports. My plans and goals changed at this point. I would build a Google Site as a testing ground for content and as a way to gather feedback about my choices. The actual implementation of this material on our main site fell out of the scope of this project and will occur sometime after the new website redesign is complete. This turned out to be the better approach, as this timeline allowed for longer and better review of content as well as a more a more considered approach to larger organizational needs and considerations.

The learning objective of the tool I developed would stay the same. My goal was still to expose international graduate students in my school to the wide range of options that exist to support their learning in an effort help them to access the resources. The content that I chose was filtered by thinking about what already exists and what doesn't exist elsewhere.

### **Development Phase**

The development phase is where the developers create and assemble the content assets that were created in the design phase. In mid-November, after gathering together

all the materials from the previous months of web research, meetings, interviews, and workshops, I began to actually build the site.

For this part of the project I familiarized myself with the latest version of Google Sites, uploaded my university's branded designs and templates, and then began entering in the content for the site.

### **Implementation Phase**

This is the portion of the project where I shared my website with others. Because the content I curated and used to build my site is not part of the main school website as I first imagined, I launched my website as a pilot to key individuals in my school to judge the usefulness of the material. This group included a program coordinator, student services staff, career services staff, a faculty member, an assistant dean, and an alum of our school who is a non-native English speaker and former international student. I distributed the link via email and encouraged the group to use the site.

### **Evaluation Phase**

The evaluation phase consists of two parts: formative and summative. Formative evaluation is present in each stage of the ADDIE process. As you can see in earlier descriptions of the stages, this evaluation and feedback is discussed. During each part of the process I reviewed and altered the project based on new findings. Summative evaluation occurs at the end of the process and after the project is launched. It is the chance to measure whether the project met its intended goals and provides opportunities for feedback from the users. The final evaluation of my project was an open-ended survey to pilot users. They were asked specifically to review content over design and to

provide any commentary about my choices. I wanted to know if this would be a tool that they would use or recommend and if this would help them connect students to support resources. I also announced the intention to eventually migrate this material from its current site to our main school webpage.

## **Results**

The results of this evaluation were encouraging. All pilot users were excited about the site. Most felt that it addressed needs that we do not otherwise currently address in student services. All of the users said that the information was clear and that the scope of the materials was appropriate. Suggestions for improvement were to add in additional resources about career services, health and well-being, and additional links to important policies. Word choices and framing in specific sections was also addressed and this was especially helpful.

Without prompting, pilot users suggested some future directions for this project including using the materials for orientation purposes and staff training. The stated goal of this project was discover how to build the capacity of student services staff and university faculty to connect graduate level English language learners to appropriate language-based resources. Based on the pilot feedback, I believe that this tool is good first step towards meeting that goal, but will really only become effective with wider distribution and broader awareness.

The most obvious next step is to revise the website and share it with additional staff, faculty, and current students for their feedback. This will allow for further revision of content before migrating the content to another site and sharing more broadly.

### **Summary**

This chapter looked the methods of developing a support tool to help connect non-native English speaking graduate students to English language support resources around campus. It also considered the assumptions that are being made about the tool including how the site will be accessed, who the site is for, and what it seeks to do. The process outlined the timeline of the project, the steps I took to gather and curate content and choose the technology. Lastly, it discusses building the site, launching it to a small pilot group, evaluating the website, and the next steps. The next and final chapter of this paper will discuss what I learned through the capstone project process, consider how the capstone has affected my personal and professional growth, look back on the literature review, address possible implications and limitations of the project, and imagine potential future projects.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **Conclusion**

This project sought to discover how to build the capacity of student services staff and university faculty to connect graduate level English language learners to appropriate language-based resources. The previous chapters of this paper discussed the motivations for engaging in this project, a review of the literature, and the method of building capacity in the form of a website. This chapter is a critical reflection of what was learned during the process and a look ahead. It describes my major learning, limitations, implications, and next steps.

#### **Major learnings**

I learned a great deal by undertaking this project, but there are two themes that I especially want to address in this paper. One of the major themes of my learning is broadening and the second major theme in my learning is alignment. I had to broaden my project scope to address wider needs and broaden my thinking beyond my original project boundaries and consider new potential uses of the content on my site. Through this, I found that my work was aligning with other staff in my school and the wider campus.

The first theme of broadening is one that I did not expect. One piece of advice that I got from others about completing my capstone was to keep my focus narrow. I heard repeatedly that too often students at the master's level take on overly ambitious projects that are out of bounds of what can reasonably be accomplished in one to two terms. I expected that I would have to monitor this and my job would be to keep the project small.

How surprising to learn that my project would improve by widening instead and that the overall broadening was something I would welcome.

The first widening was in scope. As I started working on this project, I chose to focus on just the language needs of graduate level international students. There were several reasons for this particular focus. One is personal - my degree program is the MAESL and language is a primary interest of mine. I wanted to work on something that would stay close to this area of study. Another compelling reason, beyond my own desires, is that the literature review I conducted for this project showed that English language proficiency is a central concern of many international students and the faculty that work with them. Higher proficiency is correlated with positive outcomes, both academic and personal. My suspicion that the support needs of graduate students are sometimes overlooked in favor of the support needs of undergraduate students was confirmed by this review as well so I felt confident in keeping my focus on addressing the gap in language support needs for graduate level professional students.

However, a number of different issues arose during the project that widened the scope of my work. Instead of focusing solely on *language* support resources, I realized that I needed to include support resources for additional student needs. This realization was a product of the second theme of my learning, which is alignment.

When I first proposed the idea of building a resource for international students in my school, I was not aware of everything that was happening elsewhere on campus regarding international students. I was continually discovering that other individuals, programs, and offices were grappling with similar themes and problems across the

university. This was encouraging as it showed me that this work is valuable and starting to be taken more seriously. My ignorance also reinforced one of my central arguments that large research universities are places where it can be hard to know what is happening in other areas. If I, an employee of many years, was still learning about support resources and initiatives, it must surely be a challenging place for international students.

It is tempting to say that this attention to international students was a result of the current American political climate, but some of the projects and conversations that were going on had started well before this year. Although I believe that the political and cultural context of a new government does play a part, it wasn't and isn't the only driver of this effort. My guess is that this greater attention is also product of quality improvement at my institution, the need for better student satisfaction as a result of a greater reliance on tuition dollars, and a renewed focus on issues of equity, diversity, and social justice. For a multitude of reasons, the campus was suddenly paying greater attention to the needs of international students through workshops, groups, and programs.

Because of this project, I found myself frequently sitting in a room with other people who also care about supporting international students. This opportunity allowed me to consider some of the other concerns that these students have outside of academic and language issues. As most educational professionals can attest, rarely is a student need found in isolation. Frequent mention was made about caring for the whole student and this prompted me to reevaluate the content on my site and broaden my thinking.

In addition to the staff and faculty perspective, students seemed to be saying the same thing. Early in the term when I attended a meeting of international students from



my school, their needs associated with language support were also embedded in other cultural issues. The students didn't just want to improve their speaking, reading, and listening, they wanted to understand what language to use with their adviser. They were asking how to interpret the messages in their syllabus about how classes are organized and how substantial their papers were supposed to be. They wanted to know how to meet other students and how to meet cultural expectations.

In the end, the website that I created has a strong and primary focus on language related resources. As the literature revealed, a focus on communication issues in the research on international students is prominent. My site directs students to ESL services, writing resources, and the professional jargon of the graduate programs I support. But then I added more items that would meet other needs as well to make the site more comprehensive in response to what I learned from students and staff. The website now has information on connecting with advisers and well-being. It also includes career resources, since planning for post-graduation is a big concern for all graduate and professional students. International students in particular want this information, as somewhere in the range of 80% of them end up staying in-country (Altbach, 2009). These students want explicit support in finding and navigating American employment opportunities. My hope is that the website I built will address a wide range of concerns and that the content can change as needed.

### **Limitations**

Like all projects, there are limitations. First is the overall limitation of a website to act as student support. In student services work we try to reach students in a variety of

ways including offering websites, print materials, orientations, and workshops. But there is no real substitute for one-on-one support. With a website, while students can access it from wherever they have internet access, they have to first recognize their need, decide to search for assistance, find the right help, and then follow through. Unlike the give and take of conversation, the interaction with the website is a solo endeavor. Despite the increase in responsiveness in new technology, with this kind of site, there is no chance to hear the and respond to subtle clues and signals of a student. The content of websites doesn't adjust on the fly and looking at a website doesn't build connections and relationships. The power of a website is limited in the context of supporting students.

On a more practical level, another huge limitation of this project is its reach. Originally I had hoped to build a site that was part of our professional school's main website. However, our communications team was not able to support that at the time of my project development. Instead of using the main school website, the resource that I developed was built using Google Sites, a Google product that is available through our office of information technology to university staff and faculty for purposes such as this.

This was the first time that I had built something with the newest version of Google Sites so I had to spend some time learning how to use it. From a technical perspective, the use of Google sites limited some of my design choices as well as the desire to use branding templates from my university. One reviewer was unhappy with the text spacing and readability but these details were not ones that I could easily address. Like other software, there is a balance between ease of use and control. The easier a product is to use, the less you can customize the outcome. I am not a website designer or developer so

I opted for accessibility and ease of use, and focused my efforts on the curation of content. I am sure that there are opportunities and potential in the platform that I am not aware of and am not currently utilizing. This is one area that enhanced collaboration with communications staff could help improve.

The major downside to choosing Google Sites instead of our school's website is that it makes the material harder to find. Users will have to be explicitly directed to the site in order to utilize it. By not attaching this to the website where students are trained to start looking for information first, it makes the site less accessible and less useful in its current form. However, a future plan for this material is either migrate the content or link to the main site. Then we could market it to the target audiences. My colleagues and I chose to look at this as an opportunity to build content and test out the concept of a support page that can later be migrated or repurposed for other activities. The Director of Student Services feels strongly that at the very least the content of the website that I produced will be used in the future.

Overall, I do think that this project is a step toward meeting the goal of better, more tailored, student support for the graduate level students in our programs. My intention was to help build capacity for staff and faculty to connect students to resources. I think that this project, if doesn't completely meet that goal at present, has great potential to increase this capacity once it is more widely available. The limitation of time, lack of technological resources, and the broadening of the original scope of the materials meant that this project stopped short of being disseminated broadly. The use of this tool will be limited until more work is done.

## **Implications**

An implication of the creation of this site is that time and energy has now been put into building a resource with a particular student population in mind and it is reasonable for other student populations to ask why they do not have a similar resource for their specific needs. We must spend more time thinking about a classic service problem: How do you deliver service that is both tailored to specific populations but not exclusionary at the same time?

One thing that I have grappled with while completing this project is whether or not this is an exercise in “othering” our international student population. My school is paying closer attention to issues of diversity and social justice. This is a complicated topic that the present paper can not fully address. However, it is very important to consider how this project fits in.

I curated a list of resources for a particular audience, but the act of choosing items and excluding items highlights where I personally see difference from the “regular” student population. By singling out the international students in my school I have reinforced the established hierarchies and categories that currently exist that are often problematic. I made these selections with the input of students, staff, and faculty so the choices are not informed solely by my own perspective, but ultimately the inclusion or exclusion of any given item was my decision. The needs of international students are both the same and different from other students. I want to do some additional work to think about if there is a balance between meeting these students’ special needs and treating them inclusively like any other student in the school. For example, I want to

consider if highlighting a topic like plagiarism on my website unintentionally adds to the stigmatization of this population or if it actually provides better support. Or maybe it's both at the same time. I am not sure that I have a good answer for that.

### **Next Steps**

From a practical perspective, the next steps for this project are to determine how to best use this site. First and foremost, it needs more student feedback. The small pilot group that worked with the website included two people who were themselves international students. However, it needs to be shown to many more students and have them formally assess it. This could be a project on its own.

After more evaluation and content refinement, the next hurdle is trying to decide how to migrate the materials to our main website. Moving content is technically not that difficult, but understanding how the information would fit into the larger organization of the page could be tricky. Our school's site is not strong on current student resources overall, so deciding what and how this fits into our larger service goals is important.

This project was only about building a resource to identify and connect students to existing campus resources. Future projects could involve the development of new resources or programs that fill any gaps in our on campus support systems.

Another thing to consider is that the website that I built has the student as a primary audience. Although it can be used by staff and faculty to assist students in utilizing services, there is also a need to develop a support page for faculty advisers and instructors about the best ways to support international students. This audience has a different set of needs from students, including support in facilitation, teaching, and assessing.

**Summary**

Overall this was a great learning experience for me on a personal level. By taking the project on I increased my own awareness of the resources available to students and staff around campus which will hopefully make me a better resource for others. It also increased my professional connections and helped me to feel less isolated on a large campus. I was also forced to critically evaluate information and decide how to best organize it.

I hope that this project really will serve to support students, staff and faculty. This project hasn't changed my belief that internationalizing our American campuses is the right thing to do. I hope that my contributions to the school will make a positive impact on the students that we serve and help them to navigate their own educational and personal journeys.

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